

REDUCING WORKPLACE RISKS FOR ANTHRAX EXPOSURES TO MAIL HANDLERS

WHAT TO DO?

Since the events of September 11, many employers and employees have become concerned about exposures to Anthrax. Suspected Anthrax exposure incidents require prompt action!

Suspected Exposure Incidents

If you feel you or a fellow employee may have been exposed, leave and secure the area immediately. Call 9-1-1 to contact a local police, fire or Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) office. Wash your hands, clothes and other contaminated items immediately. Seek medical attention as promptly as possible.



Non-Emergency Telephonic Assistance

Non-emergency information related to Anthrax and referrals for more help are available from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. daily at California's toll-free "Safety Information and Referral Line" at (800) 550-5234. Individuals with hearing impairments can obtain information via the toll-free TTY line (800) 550-5281.



WHAT IS ANTHRAX?

Anthrax is an infection caused by the bacterium **Bacillus anthracis**. Historically, Anthrax has been an occupational hazard to workers who handled infected animals in wildlife and agricultural settings. Recent concerns have focused on occupational settings where mail is handled. Typical modes of transmission are inhalation, cutaneous, or gastrointestinal. The symptoms of Anthrax vary depending on the mode of transmission.

- ⇒ **Inhalation Anthrax** is the most lethal form of the disease. Inhalation Anthrax must be diagnosed and treated as early as possible. The disease occurs when airborne bacterial spores are inspired. Initial symptoms resemble a viral respiratory illness like the flu or a common cold (e.g. sore throat, mild fever, muscle aches and fatigue) but may progress to severe breathing problems and shock.
- ⇒ **Cutaneous Anthrax** can occur after skin contact with contaminated sources. The bacterium enters cut or abraded skin causing a raised bump, which develops into a painless ulcer with a black center. Lymph glands in the affected area may also swell.
- ⇒ **Gastrointestinal Anthrax** can be caused by consumption of contaminated foods. Symptoms may occur in the mouth and nose (e.g. lesions at the base of the tongue, sore throat, fever) or in the stomach (e.g. nausea, loss of appetite, vomiting blood, abdominal pain and bloody diarrhea).

Anthrax infection can be treated with a variety of antibiotics if the infection is diagnosed in the early stages. Preventive treatment with antibiotics is not recommended. Anthrax is not contagious and cannot be spread by direct person-to-person contact.

REDUCING WORKPLACE RISKS

Most recently, occupational exposures to Anthrax have occurred in workplaces where employees contact mail. Efforts for reducing exposure risks should therefore be focused on tasks associated with receiving, handling or otherwise processing mail. Guidelines include:

- ⇒ Educating the workforce about Anthrax and related issues
- ⇒ Remaining vigilant to identify suspicious mail or packages with characteristics such as:
 - ◆ inappropriate or unusual labeling, excessive postage, no return address,
 - ◆ containing oily stains, discolorations, odor
 - ◆ having powdery substances that can be felt through or appearing on the envelope or package
- ⇒ Limiting the number of employees who handle the mail
- ⇒ Using appropriately designed local exhaust ventilation or other containment systems to capture airborne spores where high-speed mail-sorting or related processing equipment is operated
- ⇒ Ensuring that employees:
 - ◆ are trained to recognize and avoid suspicious packages or pieces of mail
 - ◆ wear appropriate gloves that provide a barrier to liquids and solids
 - ◆ avoid touching the external surface of work gloves
 - ◆ wash their hands and face thoroughly after removing and disposing gloves
 - ◆ wear appropriate respiratory protection if there is a potential for exposure to anthrax spores (e.g. operating high-speed mail-sorting or processing machines).
 - ◆ use work practices which may reduce the risks or severity of exposures including:
 - > avoiding dry sweeping or dusting instead using wet-vacuuming with high efficiency filters
 - > alerting others of the suspicious package or envelope, preventing others from entering the area
 - > not shaking, carrying or handling suspicious packages or envelopes
 - > not sniffing, touching, tasting, or examining closely any contents
 - > leaving the area and closing doors and windows, shutting off the ventilation system
 - > creating a list of all possible individuals whom may have had contact with the suspicious mail or package and supplying the list to local public health and law enforcement officials



FOR MORE HELP

It is important to be informed about the many available informational resources to help prevent or manage potential exposures to Anthrax. The following websites can be helpful in providing additional information.

<http://www.osha.gov/> Federal OSHA's website has information on occupational anthrax and other bioterrorism issues.

http://www.usps.gov/news/2001/press/pr01_1022gsa.htm The US Postal Service has posted information from the General Services Administration (GSA) on how to respond to an anthrax threat in a mail center.

<http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel01/mail3.pdf> The FBI poster dealing with mail handling precautions.

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/Agent/Anthrax/Anthrax.asp> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website dealing with anthrax, medical information and prevention in the workplace.

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/anthrax_g.htm To learn more about *Bacillus anthracis*.

<http://www.hopkins-biodefense.org/> For medically oriented information on anthrax.

<http://www.dhs.ca.gov/bioterrorism/> The California Department of Health Services' website dealing with bioterrorism, anthrax and mail handling.

<http://www.dot.ca.gov/safety/> The California Highway Patrol/Cal Trans website mail handling video.

<http://www.oes.ca.gov/> The California OES website with links and information on responding to emergencies and emergency preparedness.